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History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel

THAT the author of the Fourth Gospel was a theologian no one, I think, would doubt. That fact has been recognised ever since this gospel began to be studied. But John does not simply write theology. He tells a story. His book is a book about Jesus in which narratives and discourses are interwoven with comments of the Evangelist. What are we to say about the references to historical fact? Some suggest that there never ought to have been any question of taking the Johannine history seriously. Thus we have P. W. Schmiedel's well-known statement, 'A book which begins by declaring Jesus to be the *logos* of God and ends by representing a cohort of Roman soldiers as falling to the ground at the majesty of His appearance (18.6), and by representing 100 pounds of ointment as having been used at His embalming (19.39), ought by these facts alone to be spared such a misunderstanding of its true character, as would be implied in supposing that it meant to be a historical work.'[1] Not all, however, share this point of view. In recent discussions many have been a good deal more respectful to John's grasp of history. Most recent scholars would agree that on some points at any rate Johannine history should be accepted. But the question still remains a live one. Does John allow his history to be dominated by his theology? Granted that he makes use of certain facts, does he at the critical moment distort the picture, or even manufacture incidents, in order to bring out his theological meaning? Such questions are important and the position will bear examination.

Interpretation

It must be accepted unhesitatingly that John is not attempting to set forth an objective unbiased account of certain facts. He is a convinced believer and he is writing to set forth the saving significance of certain truths. He tells us as much himself: 'these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name' (John xx. 31). There is no question as to whether John is giving us interpretation. The question is whether his

[1] *Encyclopedia Biblica*, ii. 2542.

interpretation is a good one, and soundly based, whether he keeps it subservient to the facts, or whether he allows it to dominate the facts in the interests of buttressing up a dogmatic position.

First let us notice that, quite apart from the Johannine problem, it is often very difficult indeed to set forth 'facts' without interpretation. Usually the two go hand in hand. Indeed for the writing of history this is a necessity. A history differs from a journal or a chronicle among other things in being more selective. And a history treats what it selects in such a way as to bring out its significance. This bringing out of the significance is a necessary part of historical writing. If the facts it deals with are significant facts the absence of interpretation may be downright misleading. Thus C. H. Dodd reminds us that there are occurrences 'which can take their true place in an historical record only as they are interpreted, as, for example, the beginning of the Reformation at Wittenberg, or the fall of the Bastille, or the abdication of King Edward VIII. It is true that the element of interpretation opens the door to all the fallibilities of the human mind, but the point is that the attempt to rule out any interpretation in such cases inevitably suggests a false interpretation. The events are such that the meaning of what happened is of greater importance, historically speaking, than what happened. There are even events of outstanding historical importance in which practically nothing at all happened, in the ordinary external sense of happening. It was simply that the meaning of the whole situation changed for an individual or a group, and from that change of meaning a chain of happenings ensued. Such events were the call of the prophet Mohammed, and the conversion of Ignatius Loyola, and the mysterious inward process that made the house-painter Adolf Hitler into the hope or the terror of Europe.'[1]

[1] *History and the Gospel* (London, 1938), pp. 104 f. Dodd also thinks that 'the events of history do not exist as such apart from their significance to those who experienced them, and this significance is inherent in them' (op. cit. pp. 28 f.). T. A. Roberts makes some trenchant criticisms of Dodd, and on this latter point reminds us that 'People immediately concerned with events are not always in the best position to understand the full significance of what is happening, and thus are not able to offer sound explanations' (*History and Christian Apologetic* (London, 1960), p. 89). It is true that events often have more meaning than is apparent to those who take part in them. This criticism is surely valid. But when Roberts rejects Dodd's idea of 'occurrence plus meaning' without considering the examples Dodd adduces, he is on less safe ground. The fall of the Bastille is not adequately understood if the description be limited to the actual happenings on that July day in 1789. Roberts says

Now the events of which John is writing are significant events in this sense of the term. They are events in which the significance was not obvious to all, nor apparent within a short time. Men like Pilate or Caiaphas, who were actually concerned in these events, did not understand the real meaning of what was going on. If such events are to be described at all adequately it is necessary that some element of interpretation enter into the description. It will be necessary, of course, that the interpretation be not such as to shape the facts.[1] But interpretation there must be if justice is to be done to the material.

Admitting then that the Fourth Gospel contains more than a factual account, the question that arises is not 'Can we allow an element of interpretation?' but rather 'What kind of interpretation are we faced with? Is it an interpretation that sits light to the facts or rests securely upon them?'[2]

The Four Gospels and History

This question is wider than one Gospel. It is increasingly recognised in modern writing that there is theology in all four Gospels. They are

'events happened in the past, and events are what they are, no more, no less. They cannot be divided by some process of division, mental or otherwise, into occurrences and meaning. An event strictly has no meaning' (p. 92). This seems contradicted by his own contentions elsewhere, e.g. his account of the significance of the Battle of Britain (pp. 89 f.).

[1] Cf. Hoskyns, 'it is illegitimate for us to suppose that we are interpreting the gospel, if we for one moment think that we have solved the problem of the Fourth Gospel by maintaining either that the Evangelist has identified his ideas with the Truth of God or his spiritual experience with the eternal life of the Spirit of God, or that he has simply equated what any observer might have seen or heard of Jesus with that which eye hath not seen nor ear heard of the glory of God' (*The Fourth Gospel* (London, 1950), pp. 17 f.).

[2] Cf. H. Cunliffe-Jones, 'The presentation of the ministry of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is markedly different from that in the other three, and yet it leads to the same result. If the right way to think of the Fourth Gospel is to think of it as an interpretation rather than a simple narrative, and that the independent factual historical traditions which it may contain are to be discerned through that interpretation rather than picked out from it as plums from a cake, can we not go on from there to ask whether we agree with the interpretation, and whether that interpretation expresses something that was true of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus as it happened? If our answer is in any way positive to these questions, then it should be possible to think together what we have accepted as true of the ministry in all four Gospels' (*Studia Evangelica*, ed. K. Aland *et. al.* (Berlin, 1959), p. 22; this volume is henceforth referred to as *SE*).

none of them pieces of objective history, but all are written 'from faith to faith'. Their concern is to set forward the purposes of God, to show men what God has done in Christ for their salvation, and so to bring them to faith. But it is also being recognised that all four Evangelists were concerned for the facts, that they realised that Christianity is a historical religion and that the facts must be treated with respect.

There is an interesting comparison here with the apocryphal gospels spawned in the early church. These 'gospels' are not really concerned with fact though they purport to relate events. They are concerned with edification as their authors understand it, and the result is a curious hotchpotch of piety and wonder tales and superstition. The canonical Gospels are essentially different. As A. Wikgren puts it, they 'show a qualitative difference, and are by comparison set within a definite historical matrix and are redolent of the times and places which they treat. The one is clearly imaginative writing; the other might be called appreciative reporting.'[1] This last expression sums up the Gospels very beautifully. Appreciative they certainly are. But what the writers are doing is reporting, and that should not be overlooked. They never break out into expressions of praise or adoring wonder or the like. They give us sober narratives of events. We need not doubt that a selection of incidents has been made, nor that that selection has been carefully arranged. But the writers do not lose touch with the world of reality. Their feet are on the ground. They do not give way to the temptation to manufacture traditions which will fit their doctrines.[2]

It must also be borne in mind that the Gospels are early writings. Sometimes writers pay so much attention to the lapse of time between the occurrence of the events and the composition of the Gospels that they do not notice that this interval is not long enough for much in

[1] *SE*, p. 120.

[2] This seems to me to make the verdict of T. A. Roberts unduly sceptical when he says, 'there seems to be sufficient evidence to establish the fact of the existence of Jesus as a historical person, but there may be insufficient evidence to say very much more than this' (op. cit. p. 164). However, he does point out that Christianity's claim about the act of God in Jesus 'cannot be proved or disproved by the historian, using the techniques of historical criticism, for the claim goes beyond the bounds of what is within the historian's power to assert to be either true or false' (loc. cit.). But he insists that theological language 'is not historical language and is not entirely supported by appealing to historical considerations. Our main criticism of historical theologians is that all too frequently they seem unaware of this distinction' (op. cit. p. 171).

the way of development. The wonders of the apocryphal gospels took much longer to appear.[1]

The Gospel

It is significant that from very early times the church thought of the four Gospels as being essentially in harmony. The manuscripts were entitled, significantly, not 'The Gospels', but 'The Gospel', and the four were differentiated by 'according to Matthew', etc.[2] The church proceeded from a deep-seated conviction that there is no cleavage between one and another of the four, but that they must be taken together in any attempt to understand the Christian gospel. We still need this insight.

O. Cullmann has an interesting comment on the fourfold gospel. 'Four *biographies* of the same life could not be set alongside one another as of equal value, but would have to be harmonized and reduced to a

[1] Cf. A. Wikgren, 'the lapse of time between the events and their earliest christological interpretation was so short that remembrance of the historical Jesus and his teaching would very probably be strong enough to preclude any drastic revision of the tradition in the interest of the christology at this stage' (op. cit. pp. 123 f.). Earlier he has contrasted Christianity with the religions of Egypt and Greece. 'Osiris may have been an ancient Egyptian king; Orpheus was very possibly a reformer of the Dionysiac religion. But there is nothing in the way of written records from the period concerned which remotely approaches our gospels in authenticity, and the myth has completely taken charge of what if any historical events may have been involved. It is difficult to imagine that proponents of the view that the myth is all-important, to the exclusion of the historical events, will be ready to place Christianity and these cults on the same level in this respect. If they do not, they must suppose that the christology arose from the events and sustains the same vital connection with them' (op. cit. p. 122).

[2] O. Cullmann thinks that at first the multiplicity of Gospels was a problem to the church: 'When the need to possess a New Testament canon alongside that of the Old Testament gradually emerged and apostolic authorship was required as the criterion for canonicity, it was inevitable that the combination of our four Gospels should give offence' (*The Early Church* (London, 1956), p. 41). But his attempt to show the 'offence' is not in my judgment particularly convincing. I see no evidence that the church did other than welcome the Gospels, perhaps hesitating a little over John. In any case Cullmann can say 'The description of the Gospels as *εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ Μαθθαῖον, κατὰ Μάρκον, κατὰ Λουκᾶν, κατὰ Ἰωάννην* which had probably become current by the middle of the second century, best does justice both to the true unity of the four Gospels and the necessity of having a number of different authors. It is a question of combining different witnesses to the one Gospel' (op. cit. p. 53).

single biography in some way or other. Four Gospels, that is, four books dealing with the content of a faith, cannot be harmonized, but require by their very nature to be set alongside one another.'[1] There is more than one thing in this passage that I would disagree with, but the suggestion that the Gospels should be set side by side is valuable. It is possible to struggle vainly seeking better and better ways of harmonising difficult passages, and in general wrestling with the difficulties posed by the fact that we have four Gospels. It is better to seek to discover what may be learnt from each of the four and to rejoice in the enlarged understanding that the fourfoldness brings us.[2] For we need all four and would be immeasurably impoverished without any one of them.

It is possible to be taken up with the differences between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptists. And these differences are real. We should not shut our eyes to them. But neither should we be hypnotised by them. The fact is that, unlike some modern scholars, the Church has traditionally been more impressed with the resemblances than with the differences. The Church has not worshipped two Christs, the Christ of John and the Christ of the Synoptists. It has worshipped one Christ, the Christ of the gospel, the fourfold gospel. It has acted on the assumption that, for all their obvious differences, the four Gospels are basically in harmony. In this connection H. Cunliffe-Jones has asked an interesting question: 'can we think with full integrity of mind, and without diminishing the persistent analytic study of the New Testament documents, that whatever the intimacy of the relation between the first three Gospels, and, even though we realise that it is quite impossible to compose a formal harmony between the Gospels, can we think that we have in fact for our thinking as well as for our devotion, four synoptic Gospels, because all four contribute to a common understanding of a common Lord?'[3] 'Four synoptic Gospels'! It is an

[1] Op. cit. p. 54.

[2] Cunliffe-Jones quotes B. F. Westcott, 'The real harmony of the Gospels is essentially moral and not mechanical. It is not to be found in an ingenious mosaic composed of their disjointed fragments, but in the contemplation of each narrative from its proper point of view' (*SE*, p. 20).

[3] *SE*, p. 24. He has earlier noted Dodd's point that the Farewell Discourses in the Fourth Gospel have a good deal of matter in common with the Synoptic Gospels and goes on, 'If this is so, then the possibility of integrating together the teaching of Jesus in all four Gospels is not so remote as it might at first sight seem. If the teaching of Jesus as given to us in the Fourth Gospel is in fact in large measure a true interpretation of the actual historic teaching of our

intriguing phrase for a valuable idea. And though the Church has never used this terminology it has always acted on the idea that underlies it.

It is important that we penetrate beneath the surface of the words to the meaning they are expressing. A. M. Hunter has pointed out that we can have a unity of idea even though the form of words may be very different. Thus he cites passages like the Synoptic reference to 'the Kingdom of God', Paul's 'being in Christ' and John's 'the Logos becoming incarnate'. 'Now, isolate each of these phrases, and observe what is likely to happen. Your study of the Kingdom of God may take you back through Judaism to the Old Testament and perhaps even (as it did Otto) to primitive Aryan religion. Your study of the Pauline formula "in Christ" may take you back to Hellenistic mysticism (as it did Deissmann). Your study of the *Logos* may take you back through Philo to Plato and the Stoics. At the end of your investigations you may be left wondering what conceivable connexion there is among them all. Yet when Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke x. 9) and Paul, "If any man is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Cor. v. 17) and John, "The *Logos* became flesh and dwelt among us" (John i. 14), they were not making utterly different and unrelated announcements; on the contrary, they were using different idioms, different categories of thought, to express their common conviction that the living God had spoken and acted through his Messiah for the salvation of his people.'[1] What each of these writers is doing is saying in his own idiom that in Jesus Christ we see God's action for the salvation of all mankind. It is this breadth of vision that we need if we are to compare the Fourth Gospel with the other three. There are differences indeed, but there is not a different message and not a different Christ. John is speaking about the same Lord and the same salvation as his Synoptic confreres, and his different forms of expression should not hide this fact from us.

Next let us notice the point made by C. H. Dodd, 'I believe that the course which was taken by *Leben-Jesu-Forschung* ("The Quest of the Historical Jesus", according to the English title of the most important record of that "Quest") during the nineteenth century proves that a severe concentration on the Synoptic record, to the

Lord, then while for other purposes we need to stress the analysis of the differences between the different traditions as to the teaching of our Lord, for many theological and pastoral purposes the unity and coherence of the teaching in all four Gospels is a stress of enormous practical importance' (*SE*, p. 23).

[1] *The Unity of the New Testament* (London, 1944), pp. 14 f.

exclusion of the Johannine contribution, leads to an impoverished, a one-sided, and finally an incredible view of the facts—I mean, of the *facts*, as part of history.'[1] The Synoptic Gospels do give us historical facts. But those who have concentrated exclusively on these three Gospels when they want facts have come to such extraordinary conclusions that, quite apart from virtues we see in individual passages, the Johannine contribution is essential if we are to have an adequate picture of Jesus as He was. Or, to put the same thing in another way, we must feel that it was for good reason that the Holy Spirit inspired men to write four Gospels and not three.

John's Interpretation and the Facts

Here let us notice some words of Vincent Taylor, 'What, then, are we to say of the historical value of the Fourth Gospel? Little indeed, if we will have it that the historical is the purely factual, but much if we believe that interpretation is a valid form of historical writing, and that the Evangelist's work is legitimate interpretation. That his interpretation is legitimate, as compared, say, with the fantastic developments in the Apocryphal Gospels is shown by three things: (1) our knowledge of the Synoptic sayings with which he so often begins, (2) the many points of contact between the picture of the Johannine Christ and that presented by the Synoptists, and (3) the response his interpretation has evoked throughout the centuries, so that many Christians find themselves peculiarly "at home" with John, while appreciative of the worth of the Synoptics and the Pauline Epistles as a whole. To these considerations we may add the special Johannine traditions which historians of the calibre of Goguel believe to be historical, such as the tradition concerning a pre-Galilean ministry, the extended treatment given to the Jerusalem ministry, the reference to Annas, the date of the Last Supper, and the strong emphasis laid upon the reality of the humanity of Jesus, the divine Word who became flesh. One cannot hesitate to affirm that the Fourth Gospel contributes to a fuller appreciation of Jesus and his teaching than can be gained from the Synoptic Gospels read in isolation.'[2]

What Taylor is stressing so strongly is that the element of interpretation which is undoubtedly present in the Fourth Gospel is no necessary hindrance to its truthfulness. John deals with facts. Let us consider

[1] *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1953), p. 446.
[2] *The Life and Ministry of Jesus* (London, 1954), pp. 23 f.

in this connexion the picture of John the Baptist that emerges from this Gospel. The fourth Evangelist is not concerned to give us by any means a complete picture of the Baptist's activities. He sees him in one capacity only, that of a witness to Jesus. His ethical teaching, his denunciation of the 'offspring of vipers' (Luke, iii. 7), his warnings of the coming wrath, even his baptising of Jesus are all passed over in silence. He is shown consistently as bearing his witness to Jesus, that and nothing more. Here surely is a place where John may be thought of as allowing his interpretation to dominate the facts, and of letting us see the Baptist not as he was, but as he would have liked to be? Such is the conclusion of more than one exegete.[1]

But now the Dead Sea scrolls have altered all that. One of the more unexpected results of the study of the scrolls is that at point after point there are contacts with John's portrait of the Baptist. Some scholars are of opinion that John the Baptist had originally been a member of the Qumran community. Others (with greater probability) feel that if this is not proven at least the most likely supposition is that he had been brought up in some such community. Whatever the explanation, it is plain enough that the Baptist was familiar with teaching of the Qumran type. Again and again John's portrait of the man and his activity is illuminated by the scrolls. There can scarcely be any doubt but that the fourth Evangelist knew the facts about the Baptist and was scrupulously careful in recording them.[2] J. A. T. Robinson says on this point, 'one of the most remarkable effects of the Scrolls has been the surprising vindication they appear to offer of ideas and categories attributed to John by the fourth Evangelist which recent criticism would never have allowed as remotely historical. Indeed, nothing, I prophesy, is likely to undergo so complete a reversal in the criticism of the Gospel as our estimate of its treatment of the Baptist, and therefore of the whole Judean ministry of Jesus with which it opens.

[1] P. Gardner-Smith thinks the Fourth Evangelist knew little about the Baptist. 'What is not so often recognized', he says, 'is that there is little evidence that he knew more of the John of history than what he might have learned from the vague traditions of the churches before these traditions became crystallized in the Synoptic Gospels' (*Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels* (Cambridge, 1938), p. 4). How the picture has changed since 1938!

[2] Cf. W. H. Brownlee, 'Almost every detail of the Baptist's teaching in both Synoptic and the Fourth Gospels has points of contact with Essene belief' (*The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed. K. Stendahl (London, 1958), p. 52); 'The most astonishing result of all is the validation of the Fourth Gospel as an authentic source concerning the Baptist' (ibid.).

This treatment has almost universally been assumed to spring from purely theological motives of a polemical nature and thus to provide evidence for a very minimum of historical foundation. . . . On the contrary, I believe that the fourth Evangelist is remarkably well informed on the Baptist, because he, or the witness behind that part of his tradition, once belonged to John's movement and, like the nameless disciple of 1, 37, "heard him say this, and followed Jesus" '.[1] Now if on this point where he has so often and so confidently been assailed the fourth Evangelist is now seen to emerge with flying colours this gives us confidence in other passages.[2] The doctrinal and polemical motives are there. Few would deny it. But we are treating of the writing of no ordinary man. At the very least our author was an exceedingly able writer. He did not have to distort his facts to accomplish his doctrinal aims. He was able to take what actually happened and speak of it in such a way as to bring out its deeper meaning. John was not trying to impose a pattern on the history, but to draw attention to the pattern that emerges from the history.[3]

[1] *SE*, p. 345. A. Wikgren is also impressed by John the Baptist. 'The enigmatic figure of John the Baptist is one which no early Christian apologist is likely to have invented and which most would like to have forgotten. Certainly he constitutes an insurmountable stumbling-block to any purely mythological interpretation of Jesus. . . . The Qumran scrolls have now also released a flood of new light upon the total background against which John and Jesus began their ministries. Whatever one may think of the bearing of this upon the question of Christian origins, the effect is nevertheless to set them both more firmly than ever within a definite historical situation, and to facilitate a more accurate appreciation and evaluation of the religious factors which constituted the milieu in which messianic thought had its most important pre-Christian development' (op. cit. p. 124).

[2] It is interesting to notice how opinion has changed on such a subject as the raising of Lazarus. Cf. Bishop Cassian, 'The Lucan parable (16) ends with Abraham's answer to the request of the Dives (v. 31) that Lazarus might be sent in his father's house. For the liberals of the XIX century the resurrection of Lazarus in John was a fiction intended as an answer to this request. The contemporary scholars would not deny its historicity' (*SE*, p. 145). As an illustration of this W. H. Cadman in an article called 'The Raising of Lazarus' (*SE*, pp. 423-434) discusses the story without casting doubts on its historicity at all. J. E. Davey raises grave doubts (op. cit. pp. 119, 126 f.), but he thinks there is some history here and that it gives the explanation of Jesus' return to Jerusalem (op. cit. p. 46).

[3] C. H. Dodd sees the passion narrative as fixed in the tradition very early, and speaks of 'the absence of any such theologizing of the story as might not unreasonably have been expected, in view of its theological importance. This is especially notable in the Fourth Gospel. That work is in general deeply

It is important to notice that John writes a good deal of 'witness'. We have already had occasion to notice that he emphasises this aspect of the work of the Baptist. But he does not stop there. He thinks of the witness also of others. Altogether there are seven who bear their witness to Jesus within his pages. Most important of all is the witness of the Father (John v. 31 f. etc.), for this is the witness that carried conviction to Jesus. Our Lord is said also to have borne witness to Himself (viii. 14, 18), and His works bore witness to Him also (v. 36, x. 25). The Third Person of the Trinity bears witness to the Second (John xv. 26), and the inspired Scripture joins in this witness (John v. 39). The seventh witness is that of human witnesses of various kinds: the disciples (John xv. 27), the Samaritan woman (John iv. 39), even the multitude (John xii. 17).

This stress on witness is noteworthy. Witness is a legal word. It points to valid testimony, to that which will carry conviction in a court of law. It is incompatible with hearsay or with a garbled version of the facts produced to force a theory. The fact that John so continually appeals to confirmation by witnesses indicates that he at any rate had no notion that he was departing widely from the truth. He was setting forth what he believed to be the basic facts and he cited witnesses who could confirm this. The Synoptists have nothing like this. The confident appeal to witnesses is John's own.

In this connexion one must protest against a good deal of the method of some scholars who assume that John wrote out of the needs of the Church at the time that the Gospel was composed, and that he freely composed incidents to meet that need. Thus Cullmann understands John iv. 38 to refer not to any situation in the life of Christ, but to the later life of the Church. The words are: 'I sent you to reap that whereon ye have not laboured: others have laboured, and ye are entered into their labour.' Cullmann understands the 'others' to mean the Hellenists of Acts viii who took the Gospel to Samaria. The apostles came later and

penetrated with a distinctive theology, but if one reads its passion narrative it is difficult to find more than two or three points at which the narrative appears to have been influenced by that theology. As a whole it is singularly plain and objective' (*History and the Gospel*, pp. 83 f.). On a very small point, the doubled 'verily, verily' (against the single 'verily' of the Synoptics) J. E. Davey draws attention to Jesus' habit of repeating words as shown in the Synoptics (Matt. xxiii. 37; Luke x. 41, xiii. 34, xxii. 31) and concludes 'it seems probable that *John* has preserved in "verily, verily" a trick of speech of Jesus Himself (at times), which is here supported by parallel, yet quite different, cases in the Synoptic Gospels' (op. cit. p. 55).

entered into the labour of their predecessors. He maintains that John's 'aim is to show that the Christ of the Church corresponds to the Jesus of history, and to trace the direct connection between the life of Jesus and the varied expressions of Church life'.[1] So in this particular instance 'the evangelist (John iv. 33 f.) is concerned to show that this mission (i.e. that of the Hellenists to Samaria) was intended by Christ'.[2] In other words, though the passage purports to tell of an incident in the life of our Lord, it actually refers to no such incident but to a situation in the life of the Church. J. A. T. Robinson has subjected this to a close scrutiny in an article called 'The "Others" of John iv, 38' with the significant sub-title, 'A test of exegetical method'.[3] He is able to show without much difficulty that Cullmann's thesis that there is no satisfactory historical situation in the life of Jesus to which these words can be applied is not accurate. There is the ministry of John the Baptist and his followers (and other suggestions have at times been made). The point is that when we put to the test the suggestion that John was in the habit of manufacturing incidents on which to hang his instruction for the church of the day, it is found wanting. Robinson's conclusion is worth noticing: 'It is, I believe, by taking the historical setting of St. John's narrative seriously, and not by playing ducks and drakes with it, that we shall be led to a true appreciation of his profound reverence for the history of Jesus as the indispensable and inexpendable locus for the revelation of the eternal *Logos* itself.'[4]

In point of fact John was hardly in a position to manufacture his incidents and his sayings. It is agreed by nearly all students that one of his aims was to deal with opponents of a Gnostic, Docetic type who in effect denied the reality of the incarnation. That is why he carries through his emphasis on the truth that 'the Word became flesh' (John i. 14). The Docetists denied this. For them the Godhead could not defile itself with contact with sinful flesh. All here was 'seeming'. In the face of this kind of teaching John stressed the actuality of the incarnation.[5] But he was on safe ground only so long as he kept to the facts. The moment he made use of a fabricated incident he laid himself open to the accusation that he was proceeding along the same

[1] Op. cit. p. 186.
[2] Op. cit. p. 192.
[3] *SE*, pp. 510-515.
[4] Op. cit. p. 515.
[5] Cf. Hoskyns, 'his whole conscious intention is to force his readers back upon the life of Jesus in the flesh and upon His death in the flesh, *as the place of understanding*: he is therefore guilty of gross self-deception if he is inventing or distorting the visible likeness of Jesus to further his purpose' (op. cit. p. 117).

lines as the Docetists. If his 'incidents' did not happen outside his fertile brain then he was no different from the Docetists who denied the reality of the events of the life of Christ while sticking to the spiritual reality they saw in the stories. As Robinson says, 'it is astonishing how readily critics have assumed that our Evangelist attached the greatest importance to historicity in general and had but the lightest regard for it in particular'.[1]

The subject is a large one, and in a short article it is not possible to do it justice. Much of the evidence has not even been mentioned here, and this cannot profess to be an approach to a complete survey. But I have endeavoured to draw attention to some factors which are in danger of being overlooked or minimised, and which have the effect of supporting the view that John is concerned with history just as much as with theology.

[1] Op. cit. p. 344.